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Juvenile Fiction

A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear
Atiq Rahimi
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Twenty-one-year-old Farhad finds his life upended when he breaks a seemingly minor law in 1979 Kabul. The indiscretion that launches Farhad's nightmare is terrifying for its banality: returning from a going-away celebration with a friend who is fleeing Kabul, Farhad forgets the password he must recite to the soldiers of the newly-empowered Marxist People's Party who stop him. Savagely beaten, left to die in a gutter, mind whirling with pain and the effects of alcohol, Farhad must navigate an unfamiliar place that might be his home city, the land of the dead, or a sinister in-between.

In his half-dreaming, half-awake state, Farhad is taken in by a woman whose orphaned son has mistaken him for a father recently executed by the new government. Unsure of his own mind, Farhad plays this role, hoping merely to survive to see the morning's light, and places himself in this strange woman's hands. Farhad accepts this situation, explaining, "I'd rather I were having a nightmare than living my life."

Atiq Rahimi's slim novel is surreal and bleak, a glimpse into the nightmare that was the socialist experiment in 1979 Afghanistan, the beginnings of a decade-long Soviet occupation. Kabul is a city at the intersection of past and present, where the feared djinns from Farhad's childhood nightmares now wear jackboots and bludgeon their victims with Kalashnikovs.

"Strange," Farhad muses, "how, when you're dreaming, the dream-reality seems to be more real than reality itself. This is what we are like: our dreams are more plausible than our lives." In a city in disarray and without electricity, ruled by a savage new government, with his own father fled to Pakistan, Farhad's life is stranger than he could have ever imagined. It is his coming to grips with this new reality and his only chance for survival that makes Rahimi's book so compelling.

Rahimi is an author known for his unflinching examination of his home country as much

as the experimental styles in which he writes—a previous novel, *Earth and Ashes*, was written in the risky second-person tense. *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear* takes risks in its structure—even the narrator is unsure of who he is, where he has landed, and why, while the narrative frequently jumps backward and forward in time. But Rahimi's carefully controlled new novel exploits these uncertainties, joining the past to the present and legend with fact, creating an appropriately surreal narrative, one that rings through with truth.

Michael Beeman